

# Giving directions in Euripides' *Hecuba*

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The English language provides many different ways of telling people to do things. 'Put the kettle on, Tom' and 'Could you put the kettle on, Mr Blimp?' are two of many forms in which the same request might be put to the same person. But these two sentences are not equivalent, nor is it likely that the same speaker would use both. Each of these requests has two components: a way of addressing Thomas Blimp ('Tom', 'Mr Blimp'), and an expression conveying the request itself ('Put the kettle on', 'Could you put the kettle on?'). It is common for instructions in English to contain both components, though each element can also appear separately, and the same was true of ancient Greek. Similarly Greek, like English, makes subtle distinctions between the different terms usable in each component.

## Commanding in Greek

A Greek giving an order to a slave would often use an imperative to produce a simple command translatable as 'do this' or 'don't do that'. This command would normally be unaccompanied by any address, and if an address was used, it would usually be 'boy' rather than the slave's name. Speaking to an equal, a Greek might still use an imperative; that imperatives were not inherently impolite is illustrated by the fact that the standard formula for greeting and farewell, *caire*, is an imperative meaning 'be well'. But when speaking to someone of similar rank a Greek could also – especially if the request might not be well received – choose a more tactful alternative, and these politer directives are common when speaking to superiors. They include some constructions which can be translated as 'you might do this' or 'you could do that', and others which mean something similar to 'it is necessary' or 'one ought to'. These suggestions are very often accompanied by the addressee's name (as Greeks had only one name, distinctions such as those between 'Tom' and 'Mr Blimp' are not made), by kinship terms such as 'mother' or 'child', or by titles such as 'king' or 'master'. In Greek, unlike English, a question of the form 'can/could you do this?' could only be a genuine enquiry about somebody's ability to do something, not a polite request. But commands phrased as future questions such as 'are you going to do this?' or, with a negative, 'aren't you going to do this?' are characteristic of rude confrontations or of desperate urgency.

All these strategies occur in Greek tragedy. In *Antigone*, when Creon tells his servants to bring in Ismene, he says simply 'now call her'. But in pleading with Antigone not to defy Creon, Ismene says, 'one must bear in mind firstly that we are women, and therefore not meant to fight with men, and secondly that we are ruled by ones who are stronger' – ideas that Antigone has already shown herself far from likely to bear in mind. In *Oedipus Rex*, when the chorus advises Oedipus to ask Teiresias' advice, they say: 'One might learn most clearly, lord, by investigating these things from him'. In the ensuing confrontation, Oedipus hurls at the unforthcoming Teiresias several future questions of the kind 'Wickedest of wicked men, are you not going to speak (for you would anger the nature of a rock), but are you going to appear so relentless and impossible?'

Euripides' *Hecuba* is a play in which several characters undergo, or have undergone, a reversal in status, and in which

status is continually at issue. Hecuba is a slave instead of a queen. But on supplicating Odysseus, she reminds him of the time he was at her mercy – her 'slave', as she puts it (249) – caught spying within the walls of Troy. Her daughter, Polyxena, speaks of how she is a slave instead of a princess (349ff.). Yet she insists on dying without being restrained by her captors – a free woman – so that, being a princess, she will not have to be called a slave among the dead (550ff.). Polymestor, the Thracian guest-friend of the royal house of Troy, is brought low by, of all people, captured women (1095f.). These reversals, discussions, and negotiations of status make it particularly worth following how characters deal with one another – does Hecuba speak to her captors as an equal or as a captured woman; does Polyxena speak as a slave or a free woman; what about Polymestor before and after his downfall?

It is striking how little, in general, characters in this play concede status to one another. Time after time, requests – even risky requests – are couched in the imperative, as if each character claims a status at least equal to that of his or her interlocutor.

Odysseus, as one might expect, uses imperatives or their equivalent ( $\mu\eta$  + aorist subjunctive) to Hecuba when ordering her to comply with the decision to sacrifice Polyxena: 'Don't be dragged away by force, and don't get into a fight with me, but know your strength...' (225). Hecuba is at first cautious in her reply, acknowledging her inferiority and suggesting in general terms what 'is necessary' if certain general conditions are fulfilled: 'If it is permitted for slaves to ask questions of free men – not painful ones or ones that bite the heart –, it is necessary for you to be asked, and for us who ask these things to listen' (234). But once permission to interrogate is granted, she does away with the cautious tone and asks questions that remind Odysseus of his own indebtedness to her, and uses imperatives to tell him what to do: 'Listen to what you must give me in return' (272), 'don't drag the child from my arms nor kill her' (277), 'treat me with respect, pity me' (286), 'tell the Greeks that it is offensive to kill women who...' (288). Odysseus responds firmly but politely, and again his commands are couched in the imperative: 'Hecuba, learn, and do not make one who speaks well ill-disposed to you by your anger' (299), 'if you say that you suffer grievously, listen to the following from me in return' (321), 'bear these things' (326).

Polyxena, who describes her sacrifice as a way to continue free and noble to the end of her life, uses imperatives to everybody; that these commands show her own superiority rather than any degradation of the addressees is indicated by the courteous addresses that accompany the imperatives: 'Odysseus... take heart!' (342-5), 'lead me, Odysseus' (369), 'mother, don't get in my way' (372), 'mother, obey me' (402), 'son of Laertes, be lenient to parents who are reasonably upset' (402), 'unfortunate one, do not fight' (404), 'dear mother, give me your sweet hand' (409), 'take me, Odysseus' (432). The directions she is reported as having given – successfully – to her sacrificers befit the dignity with which she dies, and her insistence on freedom: 'Do not anybody touch my skin' (548), 'kill me after letting me free, so that I may die a free woman' (550), 'see, if you want to strike my chest, young man, strike here' (563).

### Talking to Kings

When Agamemnon appears on the scene in which Polydorus' corpse has just been revealed, Hecuba immediately recognises his superior status - but also its potential usefulness to her. Instead of making her request immediately she deliberates with herself, trying to find courage (736-51). Finding courage, she says politely, 'Agamemnon - I supplicate you...', (752) but then keeps him guessing for over thirty lines before coming to the point, even then carefully making her request conditional on Agamemnon's views: 'If I seem to you to suffer as is right, I should be contented. But if the contrary, become my avenger...' (788). Going on, she gains in boldness, but remains polite. The most direct restatement of her request is combined with deferential addresses: 'master, greatest light for the Greeks, obey, lend an avenging hand to the old woman...' (841). Once Agamemnon has agreed that he will help her as long as it does not get him into trouble with the army, Hecuba drops the deference, notes that even Agamemnon is not really free, and gives him a string of bald orders: 'know...but don't participate' (870), 'stop them' (874).

Hecuba and Polymestor are at first elaborately polite to each other, although - or because - both are faking friendship. Each greets the other courteously by name (954, 969), and Hecuba's addresses become ever politer as irony builds around them: 'dearest man, how well and worthily of yourself you speak' (990), 'o man loved as you are loved by me now...' (1000).

As the play draws to its close, with the frantic Polymestor dragged from the stage uttering insane (albeit true) prophecies, some of the last directives highlight the chaos that ends a play otherwise characterised by controlled yet assertive rhetoric. Appealing for Polymestor's attention, Agamemnon tries 'That man you--are you mad and desiring to suffer harm?' (1280). Careless of what remains for him to suffer, Polymestor responds 'kill me--as a blood bath awaits you in Argos'. Desperately, Agamemnon appeals for help to his servants, not in the usual manner of commands to servants but with urgent questions: 'won't you drag him out of the way by force, servants?' (1282), 'won't you hold his mouth closed?' (1283), 'won't you cast him out somewhere on a deserted island as soon as possible?' (1284).

*Philomen Probert played Hecuba in the 1996 Oxford Greek Plays; Eleanor Dickey has written Greek Forms of Address from Herodotus to Lucian (OUP 1996).*

*In this second part of his essay about Rome and Pompeii, the author Robert Harris speculates about our fascination with the Roman past.*